

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Administration Publications

Administration

3-9-2016

Snowflakes and Johnnies

Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/admin_pubs

Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2016 Mar 9. Snowflakes and Johnnies [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 14]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2016/03/09/snowflakes-and-johnnies/>.

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Administration Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Quad 136

Snowflakes and Johnnies

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

Snowflakes and Johnnies



Photo: Tommy O'Laughlin '13

In recent months the media has been filled with stories about campus controversies around intellectual engagement and free speech. From Yale to Missouri to Michigan to Wesleyan to Williams **students and faculty have been challenged by the free exchange of ideas** and the inevitable tensions that arise when opinions differ. Some students have insisted that they be protected from views they find offensive and these demands have led for calls to limit free speech on campuses. (See [here](#) and [here](#)) These new sensibilities on campus have led to questions about the mettle of millennials, with some observers calling these protestors snowflakes as a reflection of their **apparently delicate constitutions**.

These controversies obviously encourage those in higher education to reflect on our mission in educating students and also reminded me of a related conversation I had several years ago about the character of Johnnies.

I was at a dinner party and was introduced to a lawyer from abroad who was currently working in the Twin Cities. As we talked, I told him I had gone to school at Saint John's. I assumed that I would need to explain a bit more about Saint John's since he was not from the area and had been living here only a short time, but that was not the case. He was very excited to learn I was a Johnnie and excitedly told me about two Johnnie brothers he had met when he was volunteering abroad after graduating university. He was volunteering for a Catholic organization in Central America, and there were young people from all over the world. But, without a doubt, the volunteer that had the biggest impact on him was a Saint John's University graduate. He spoke with a sense of awe, even years later, about the intellectual fearlessness he observed in this young man. "He would ask the priests and the rest of us all kinds of questions about theology and social justice. He was not afraid to ask anything, but he was always polite and thoughtful. He did not approach these engagements with aggression or anger or righteous but with genuine curiosity and always with a good sense of humor. What was also striking was that his brother (also a Johnnie) came to visit a couple times and he was exactly the same way. They both seemed deeply interested in what others thought and had a strong desire to learn from them."

This lawyer had been educated at one of the finest schools in his home country, a large university that has a world-class reputation, yet he was both charmed by and admiring of the way these two Johnnies approached the world. He has apparently not met too many people like these brothers.

As I listened to the story, I thought back to my own time at Saint John's and recalled the hours sitting in a faculty resident's room listening to my hall mates talk. A lot was fluff and occasionally the conversations sophomoric, but there was also plenty of room for serious issues and quiet encouragement to try out ideas. The monks who are generous enough to live with undergraduates know how to balance the immaturity of youth with young people's genuine desire to explore meaning. Faculty residents also make it clear they are there to mentor and guide without proselytizing or pushing their own views. I had a pretty good sense of how and where those two Johnnie brothers had developed their intellectual sensibilities and finely honed emotional intelligence.

A few years later, I happened to get to meet these two brothers. They were exactly as described by their lawyer friend, but at the same time, they were also pretty typical Johnnies.



Photo: Tommy O'Laughlin '13

These campus controversies and the way students and faculty respond to them have a significant impact on the ethos on campuses, but it is relatively rare that such issues make it all the way to the White House. In this case, however, President Obama felt the need to comment on these issues, given the centrality of free speech and the exchange of idea in our political life. **He said:**

The purpose of college is not just to transmit skills. It's also to widen your horizons; to make you a better citizen; to help you to evaluate information, to help you make your way through the world; to help you be more creative. The way to do that is to create a space where a lot of ideas are presented and collide — where people are having arguments and people are testing each other's theories, and over time people learn from each other because they're getting out of their own narrow point of view and having a broader point of view.

Given these views and setting politics aside, I suspect the President would find Johnnies to be good intellectual company, as

he apparently does in [his chief of staff](#).

And I am delighted that in their own thoughtful way, these two Johnnie brothers, like so many other alumni, are modeling the kind of character and intellectual fearlessness that we continue to foster through our Catholic, Benedictine, residential, liberal arts experience.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | March 9th, 2016 | Categories: [Uncategorized](#) | [0 Comments](#)

About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).